

News from Ed Markey

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MARKEY DEMANDS ANSWERS ON USE OF FLAMMABLE FIRE BARRIERS IN NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS

Calls continued use of silicone foam "an inexcusable risk to public health and safety."

WASHINGTON, DC - Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-MA), a senior Member of the House Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Energy and Power, today released a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) demanding that it justify its continued use of flammable fire barriers in nuclear power plants.

"The notion of using flammable materials as fire barriers in nuclear power plants is as laughable as it is dangerous. It makes as much sense as using chicken wire to hold back a flood- It only works as long as it isn't needed," said Rep. Markey. "The NRC's negligence in allowing this to happen poses an inexcusable risk to public health and safety."

Rep. Markey's letter was written in response to evidence received both by his office and reportedly the NRC documenting the fact that silicone foam, which was supposed to prevent fires from spreading in nuclear reactors, is in fact highly combustible. The material is prone to widespread installation problems and defects which reportedly render it useless. The material is installed in most of the nuclear power plants in the U.S. In April, 1997, the Maine Yankee nuclear power station determined that 90% of its 2600 RTV silicone foam penetration seals were defective as a result of installation problems.

A 1991 NRC report entitled "Severe Accident Risks: An Assessment for Five U.S. Nuclear Power Plants" stated that "typical nuclear power plants will have three to four significant fires over their operating lifetime." Although the NRC has been aware of the combustibility of RTV silicone foam since 1979, it has not promulgated any regulations that would require its removal from any of the 109 operating nuclear reactors in the U.S. In fact, a 1996 NRC document stated that the Commission has found no technical basis for requiring that fire barrier materials be non-combustible.

"The idea that it is acceptable for a material that is meant to prevent fires from spreading in nuclear reactors to be highly combustible is absurd. It appears as though the NRC is more interested in saving nuclear utilities the expense of replacing this material rather than acting quickly and responsibly to protect the public," said Rep. Markey.

Copies of the letter Rep. Markey sent to the NRC today are available from Rep. Markey's office.